

eyeline

CONTEMPORARY VISUAL ART



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The Sanctuary (savage legends of life in the rainforest), 2013. Pastel, pencil and wash on Saunders Waterford paper, 80 x 153cm. Private collection, Sydney.

DANIE MELLOR

JEREMY ECCLES

2014 is an amazing year for artist Danie Mellor, with a major solo show, 'Exotic Lies, Sacred Ties', touring from the University of Queensland Art Museum (UQAM), Brisbane to the TarraWarra Museum of Art in Victoria's Yarra Valley, to the Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory, Darwin, as well as his selection as the only Australian visual arts event of this year's Edinburgh Festival. The Jan Murphy Gallery also featured Mellor at Art Basel Hong Kong—a marvellous and circuitous return of the blue and white Spode china imagery that has dominated his art since 2008, appropriated originally from Jingdezhen in China by the English ceramicists who developed transfer printing in the very same decade, the 1780s, that the English began to appropriate Australia.

But then it has also been an amazing decade of development on the part of Mellor, from my first encounters with his work at the National Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Art Awards (NATSIAAs) in the early 2000s when, writing for the *Canberra Times*, I was always delighted to report on his solo representation from the Capital. His luscious mezzo-tints of the hearts of ferns reflected his close identification with the deep green rain-forests of the Atherton Tablelands from where the maternal side of his ancestry comes. He went on to win the Big Telstra prize at the 2009 NATSIAAs with an early example of the more intellectually complex blue and white works that are now taking him to the world.

That win challenged a few perceptions. For the tall, red-maned, blue-eyed Celt, Danie Mellor is not obviously Aboriginal. It is hard to see within him his Mamu, Ngagen and Jirrbal ancestors like 'Little Gran' (Eleanor Kelly), his great great Grandmother who was about five feet tall, which, believes

Mellor, 'was an appropriate height for living and surviving in the rainforest'. The mid-20th Century anthropologist, Norman Tindale was obsessed with what he labelled the 'Negritos' of the Atherton—believing them the last remnants of a first wave of migration into Australia. Ironically, that obsession re-emerged in May when Nicolas Rothwell attempted to trace the myth/reality of 'Little People' right across Northern Australia in an article for *The Australian's* 'Review' (3 May 2014). Tindale's book (co-authored with Harold Lindsay), *Aboriginal Australians* (1963), proudly shows himself (at 184 centimeters) beside a sixty year old negrito of just 151 centimeters. But he could as easily have accessed the Kelly/Mellor photo archive going back to grandmother May, in 1910, who appears in the University of Queensland Art Museum's sumptuous catalogue peering uncertainly out of a buttoned-up Victorian-era outfit.



from left: *A SuperNatural Landscape*, 2013. Mixed media on paper, 205 x 153cm. Private collection, Brisbane; *Wild Honey: Balam girnyjal (From the mouth of the dry hollow tree)*, 2014. Pastel, pencil and wash on Saunders Waterford paper, 230 x 153cm. Private Collection, Brisbane.

This cultural clash supplied the background for the shields which were Mellor's next artistic development, featuring in the Museum of Contemporary Art's 'Primavera' show in 2005. For his set of re-imagined rainforest shields with a 'buttoned and bowed' design reflected the fastening on his grandmother's outfit, and related to the fact that, though the shields were traditionally carved from fig trees by the men of the tribe and were obviously intended for fighting, they were thought of as feminine objects.

Here we begin to discover what 'Exotic Lies, Sacred Ties' curator, Maudie Palmer calls 'Danie's clear understanding of his Indigenous heritage—his family and his Country on the Atherton Tablelands'. 'I am a contemporary artist,' declares Mellor himself, 'engaged with my ancestral history. The work that I do will always be connected to that, but I think I'm getting into really important

cultural narratives that don't preclude the rest.' Sir Jonathan Mills, the Australian composer who is directing his eighth and last Edinburgh Festival, goes even further: 'I selected Danie because he's talking about a range of things relating to Australia's connections to the UK—throwing back to Europe its own clichés from an Antipodean perspective.'

In other words, Mellor's art today represents the whole of Australia, not just its Indigenous part—despite being one of only three artists selected for both of the National Gallery's Indigenous Triennials. Indeed, in a talk in Brisbane as the UQAM show opened, he specifically distanced himself from the Blak activists on the grounds that he 'recognises a shared history in Australia—shared experiences, however unhappy'.

And what could be more shared than his NATSIAA-winning work, *From Rite to Ritual* (2009)? For the obvious Masonic references are matched by four body-painted Aborigines clearly participating in ceremony. Two forms of secret men's business. And easy to mock. Unless you accept that 'both cultural rituals are ways of transmitting knowledge, progressing through different levels of learning with a thread of commonality, but packaged differently according to the environments in which the initiation takes place'. And, like Mozart in *The Magic Flute*, Mellor reveals an insider's understanding of the rituals that allows him to make both the parallels and the incongruities accessible to non-afficionados. And all in blue and white with natural colours for the 'things that were here first—the people and their creations, and the native animals'.

'My wife Joanne introduced me to Spode china when we were both studying in Birmingham,' Mellor explains. It was only later that he undertook a characteristically deep level of research—



L'Heure Bleue, 2014. Pastel, pencil and wash on Saunders Waterford paper, 153 x 253cm (diptych, lhs 153 x 100cm, rhs 153 x 153cm).

visiting Spode in The Potteries, meeting the current generation of engravers, and examining the 30,000 plates archived from the 1780s and '90s. 'It was transferware in order to transfer a culture,' he jokes—'virtually the first globally commoditised visual language'. But it was no longer exotic and Chinese when it arrived here—'it represented the European gaze hitting our landscape and subduing it,' Mellor believes.

For what came to be lauded as 'pioneering' when done by men in the Outback was actually 'taming the nature,' including its inhabitants, as Pamela Lukin Watson has shown in *Frontier Lands & Pioneer Legends: How Pastoralists Gained Karuwal Land* (1998). 'The Enlightenment was so much about taking control of nature,' Mellor continues. 'Tom Stoppard analysed it in his play, *Arcadia*, with its talk of garden design that was manicured to a T to symbolise intellectual order, adjacent to other areas left as wild and tangled as possible to reflect the unconscious mind, nightmares and the unknown. Apollo and Dionysus. Within those terms, it was easy to see a "simple" Indigenous culture in the latter section, while failing to note that it was quite as complex as the Masons.'

Which brings us to Arcadia. What could be more quintessentially European than the notion that there needed to be a poetic space 'out there' where artists could escape to test their passions? Not quite what Europeans found in Australia as they struggled through the sandstone maelstrom of the Blue Mountains, found saltpan deserts in a Centre they expected to be well-watered, or became tangled in the lawyer-vines of the Northern rain-forests. But then, even in Europe, there was the oft-pictured caveat, *Et in Arcadia Ego*. 'I [Death] am there, even in Arcadia', carved on a tomb for Poussin, or accompanying a skull for Guercino. And that skull turns up oft in Mellor!

But the metaphor is well and truly localised in a work like *Bayi Minyjirral* (2013), with its skinny, tangled rain-forest, clouds of butterflies and a festoon of bicornal baskets hanging from the one substantial fig tree. A giant painting at 300 x 360 centimetres, big enough to walk into, or at least be immersed in. The 'Negrito' figures are at ease here—'painted at scale in order to emphasise their integration into this environment', says Mellor—though the suspended baskets contain the skeletal remains of their forebears. They are comfortable with Death in this Arcadia once they have ritualised it. But two participants are looking out of the picture to challenge my unwanted presence. 'They're returning your gaze,' Mellor explains, 'in order to start an unwitting discourse with you in your environment.'

Commentator Hetti Perkins interprets this as an imaginary world. For Danie Mellor, though, it is all too real—researched with annual visits to



clockwise from top left: *Bayi Minyjirral*, 2013. Pastel, pencil and wash on Saunders Waterford paper, nine panels, overall 300 x 360cm. Private collection, Brisbane; *A Rarified Existence*, 2014. Pastel, pencil and wash on Saunders Waterford paper, 153 x 153cm; *Of matters in life: Bayi Dumban*, 2014. Pastel, pencil and wash on Saunders Waterford paper, 80 x 153cm.

yarn with extended family in Atherton. Mind you, it does seem likely that the artist might have gone back to Tindale's books for his model of 'a native climbing rain forest tree using loop of cane', as it appears in the Art Basel Hong Kong painting, *A Rarified Existence* (2014).

Taken along with Mellor's ceramic kangaroos and taxidermied work, curator Palmer argues that it adds up to 'a museological display which conjures up flights of fancy that might have been in the imagination of those terrified and ignorant initial boat people'—to wit, postmodern irony. But, interestingly, the apparent clash of luxuriant Swarovski crystal dust, gold framing and decorative flowers around the rim of most paintings is not ironic. Here Mellor is taking a trick from Simon Schama who sees such devices as announcing the fictional essence of the painting within—from outside reality



The Shadow and the Breath (touching three worlds), 2014. Pastel, pencil and wash on Saunders Waterford paper. 240 x 153cm (vertical diptych, each panel 120 x 153cm), circular element 80cm diameter.

into the art—though they are also tools to lead you right into it. And—a touch of practicality—‘ornate frames do give a work a significance and authority’, acknowledges Mellor; ‘and on an aesthetic level gold goes really well with blue!’.

That blue (and white) is slipping away from its Spode origins, though. ‘The palate’s still there (a challenge to the reality that the word blue doesn’t seem to exist in any Aboriginal language,’ says Mellor, ‘but I’m more interested in various artists’ engagement with the colour... Yves Klein, of course—his metaphysical reading, a cosmology in colour completely transcending nature. And then there’s Max Beckman...’, the ‘decadent’ German artist who exemplified the Weimar Republic, but then had to flee the less-appreciative Nazis. His works often contain mythologised references to the brutalities of the Nazis, which may also be said of Mellor’s references to massacres of Aborigines. But beyond these immediate concerns, Beckmann’s symbols can assume a larger meaning, voicing universal themes of terror, redemption, and the mysteries of eternity and fate. As a true painter-thinker, he strove to find the hidden spiritual dimension in his subjects. ‘I see him using detail as a way of engaging with the physical to reach the immaterial,’ observes Mellor.

In Edinburgh, at the National Museum of Scotland, Danie Mellor will attempt just that with works that are again a massive 300 x 360 centimetres. His chromed bronze sculpture, *Anima* (2014) will also be there, representing the ‘Primordial’ that is the show’s title. ‘I’m interested in the Modernist engagement with primitivism,’ he explained somewhat surprisingly, given the ‘political incorrectness’ of that word. ‘By that I mean the essence of rawness, the first stirrings of life—as revealed still in the ancient growth rain-forests of Queensland. Such a gentle power there. Sadly, Scotland has destroyed the primordial when they chopped down the Great Hibernian Forest.’ But they did try to bring back the ‘primitive’ to their museums—and Mellor will be contextualising his works with Indigenous Australian objects from their collection.

Fortunately, Jonathan Mills is confident that Mellor will not be caught up in the ‘fraught times’ in which his Festival is being held: the Referendum for devolution of Scotland from the United Kingdom, which put Mills under pressure to be predominantly Scottish this year; the Commonwealth Games, which gave him the excuse to bring in Commonwealth art for this Festival; and the hang-over from last year’s big ‘Australia’ show at the Royal Academy in London. ‘It got a deservedly bad press,’ Mills believes, ‘mostly for technical reasons and its over-eagerness. But the accusation that the art was derivative has a whiff of hypocrisy about it; so much of what is excellent in art is derivative, it just depends how the derivations are employed. Fourteen works by a single artist are certainly going to be more effective than ‘Australia’s’ scatter-gun approach, and Danie really speaks eloquently—and subversively—within the architecture of Edinburgh.’

Michael Reid—Mellor’s Sydney and Berlin dealer, and lead negotiator with the Festival for this exhibition—sees the seven week event as both ‘really important for Danie’s international reputation, and a reflection of big changes in the museum world. They’re no longer just keepers, but opening their collections to outside research, review and re-interpretation. And they expect a quarter of a million visitors.’

Oddly, a small part of Danie Mellor’s childhood was spent just up the road in Stirling, playing around its ancient castle and discovering the mythology of Narnia as well as the Dreamtime. ‘Wherever stories came from, if they were well told, they had a profound effect upon my childhood imagination—which carries into my adult life.’ A delightful photo in the catalogue shows the young Mellor translating that imagination into imagery. ‘My engagement with visual culture was as powerful as with the word—and I hope it becomes ever more sophisticated as I try to engage semiotically with the global impact of transformed landscape.’ ■

‘Danie Mellor: Exotic Lies Sacred Ties’ opened at the University of Queensland Art Museum (18 January – 27 April 2014), showed at TarraWarra Museum of Art, Victoria (10 May – 13 July 2014) and will travel to the Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory, Darwin (29 August to 16 November 2014). ‘Primordial: SuperNaturalBayiMinyjirral’ will show at the National Museum of Scotland, 1 August – 23 November 2014.

Jeremy Eccles is a Sydney-based writer.